

Text: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6. 8-10; Luke 4: 14-21

Title: Good Beginnings

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My earliest church memories center on pews. The Catholic church that we went to had long pews, with kneelers. Do you know what they are? Kneelers were these long padded steps that were hinged to the pew in front of you. When it came time in the service to kneel, you flipped them down with your toes and when you were finished, you flipped them up. This is, at least what I did. I thought it was really cool to flip them up and down. The downside was that the kneelers went the length of the pew, so if you were playing with them everyone else in pew would know. Not that I really cared about them, but since my father was one of them- his reaction I cared about. The way that the church was set up was like a cross, if you viewed it from above. The top part of the cross would be the chancel, a lot deeper than ours- because it had to have room for the tabernacle (a gold cabinet that the communion host (circular disks of cardboard tasting unleavened bread- saltines without the taste) the altar and for the priest to stand behind the altar and for the altar boys to kneel off to the side and ring the bells. It was divided from the rest of the sanctuary by the communion rail. the long part of the cross was the sanctuary, where most people sat. There were 2 wings- the arms of the cross. I guess one side was for latecomers, but the other side was glassed off and was generally called the crying room. That was where mothers sat with crying babies- it was soundproofed so no one would be bothered. When Dad got fed up with mine or my brothers antics, he would threaten to make us sit in the crying room in front of God and everybody. All right – let's link worship with punishment and public humiliation! At best, worship was seen as a debt we pay God, something we do because it's something we owe God- not a lot of joy there.

I don't know if this was the case everywhere- but from what I've seen, this notion that worship is an obligation we owe God is pretty widespread. That and a serious demeanor goes with the package- how did we ever connect looking like we are suffering from stomach cramps with holiness? For this is far from the biblical image worship as the crying room was removed from my Sunday morning experiences. Worship in both

the Old and New Testaments was linked with thanksgiving and celebration- as we will see in Nehemiah.

We've talked about the Babylonian Exile, when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and marched everyone in chains to Babylon. Well, in time Cyrus the Persian conquered Babylon and absorbed it into his empire. As a goodwill gesture, Cyrus let those who were exiled go home. As you can imagine, that first wave of returnees had their hands full just trying to survive. Without resources to rebuild, all they could do was eke out a living amid the burned out ruins of Jerusalem. A generation passes and we are introduced to Nehemiah, a minor official in king Artaxerxes 1 court. Word reached him that his countrymen are not doing that well, that Jerusalem is still in ruins. So he gets permission to check things out and the king not only gives him letter that guarantee safe passage and letters of credit that will allow him to buy material to rebuild. Much of the book of Nehemiah is about the struggles to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem- for without a means of defense rebuilding the city itself would be a waste of time. Sounds like the modern Middle East, doesn't it? (the Book of Ezra tells the parallel story of rebuilding the Temple and reforming Judaism). In the face of ridicule, potential raids and political backstabbing Nehemiah is successful in rebuilding the walls and houses of Jerusalem.

We catch up after the wall is rebuilt. Ezra comes and reads the words of the Law- while we don't know for sure what book Ezra read from, the general scholarly consensus was that he was probably reading the equivalent of our Pentateuch- Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. This is more than a mere dedication of a city wall- Ezra is recounting all of God's actions towards his people, telling the story of redemption from Day One. In effect, Ezra is preaching that the people have a new beginning- there is no longer any reason to react with guilt and penitence when they hear the Law- God has wiped the slate clean and now it is time to start anew.

This is why he declares this day as Holy to Yahweh your God: do not mourn or weep. Loose the long faces! You are restored! Kill the fatted calf and have a party! Break out the wine and invite family and friends! And if you know of anyone left out- send them food and drink so that they may celebrate with their friends and family as well. Sure sounds a lot like our Thanksgiving Day, doesn't it? The point here is that

worship is about celebration and good news. Repentance has its place- but its job is to bring us to God so that we may experience the joy that comes with restoration- it is not an end in itself. Ezra is quick to add that sense of celebration, this “joy of the Lord” is to be the basis of their strength. Talk about a great way to begin as new phase in their life together!

Good news and good beginnings go hand in hand. Why we focus on bad news is often a mystery to me. My theory is that a sense of challenge lends a bit a drama to our lives, gives us something to strive for, something to overcome and a reason to get out of bed in the morning. That thing in us that sees a problem and says let’s find a solution is a gift from God. The downside though is that view puts the focus on our actions and not always on God’s solutions. So when we hear that someone we have prayed for is now doing well, when someone’s surgery has gone well, when we open our eyes and see the evidence of God’s actions before us- we naturally give thanks- and that is the basis for worship.

Last week we touched on Isaiah’s 62’s promise that God would rebuild his people, transforming them from the butt of everyone’s jokes to a blazing torch in the darkness heralding God’s actions and hope. Luke tell us that when Jesus came to his hometown to preach, he began with first part of Isaiah’s promise- that he came to preach the Good News: that God is all about relieving the suffering of the poor and setting the captives free what whatever that enslaves them. the Blind (of all types of blindness) will see and the oppressed will see hope and new life where before they saw dead ends. Bottom line- this is now the Year of the Lord’s favor- the time to wear sackcloth and ashes, to go around looking like your dog has just died- the time to equate worshipping God with saying My Fault over and over again is DONE. Ezra and Jesus are on the same page.

Now this doesn’t let us off the hook, give us permission to celebrate God’s actions while blinding us to the troubles of the world. As God’s redeemed people it is now our normal reaction, when we see brokenness, to want to do all that we can to help. As broken and restored people we want people to share in what Ezra called the Joy of the Lord. It is why we did deep when we see images from Haiti and look for ways to help those next door as well.

Of course, to some, especially those whose vested interests are centered on perpetuating bad news, Good News is anything but. By the First Century, the Messiah was widely believed to actually do the things the Isaiah was talking about. When Jesus told them that “these words are fulfilled in your hearing” they understood that he was proclaiming himself the messiah. In an ironic epilogue, Luke details how they rushed to grab Jesus, to toss him over a nearby cliff and stone him. But the cliff was outside the limits of how many steps they were allowed to walk on the Sabbath. So Jesus just keeps walking, leaving the enraged crowd behind him- check it out- its hilarious. Luke is a wonderful storyteller and he sets the tone of his gospel early on.

This is why we don't elevate long faces with worship or moral superiority. For my sins, my shortcoming and my failures have been made right- and so are yours. This year we are going to talk a lot about making connections, connections with each other, connections with our community. One of the bases of those connections is shared experiences. Each of us has had our own Jerusalem rebuilt, had our own blindness removed, and have drunk deep from the cup of God's grace. And when we fall, when we hurt, and when we trip we know that God will pick us up, dust us off and set us on our way again. So let us sing our Lord's praises, let us give thanks together as God's people. that is what worship is all about.